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THE PRIVATE LIFE
OF JEAN BAPTISTE
LE MOYNE, SIEUR
DE BIENVILLE

BY

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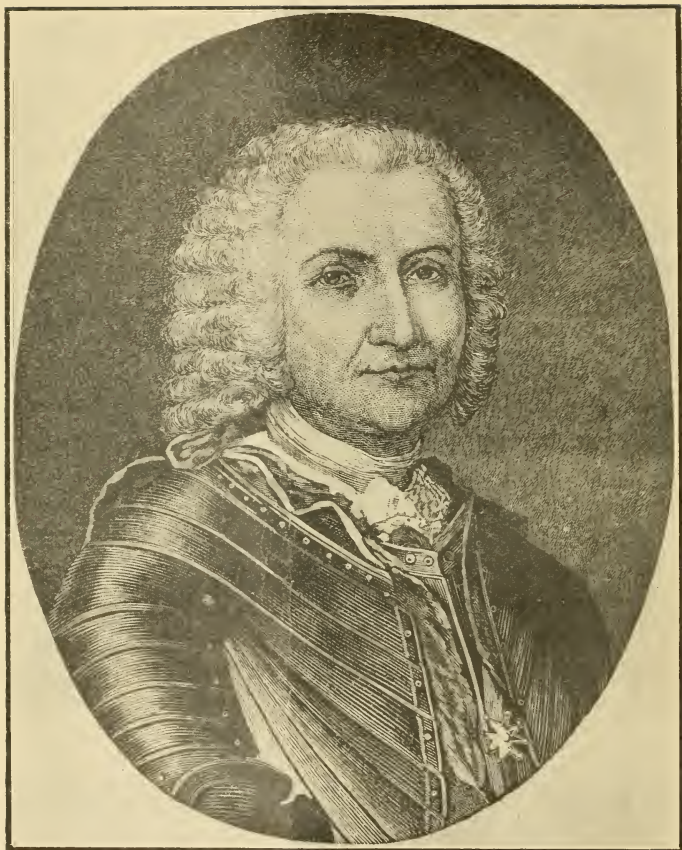
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PREFATORY NOTE.

An attempt has here been made to picture some of the scenes in the private life of the founder of Mobile, New Orleans, Natchez, and the explorer of the Mississippi Valley. His public career is almost the history of the country, and is found in Miss Grace King's *Life of Bienville*; but the movement to erect a statue of him has brought the wish to picture the man himself. The facts now given are authentic. His letter and will are given Jodoin and Vincent's Longueuil. I have transcripts of his dispatches, and much in the way of maps and otherwise is in my *Colonial Mobile*. If imagination has aided in the coloring, it is hoped that it is the historic imagination which restores rather than creates.

P. J. H.



BIENVILLE (after Margry)

The Private Life of Jean Baptiste LeMoyne Sieur de Bienville

I.—A COLONIAL LETTER.

One warm October day in 1713 a man sat on his front gallerie at Mobile writing a letter. The house was one-story, made of uprights filled in with mortar, but the palings enclosed a whole city block, facing Royal street. The ground was high and afforded views in all directions to the watchful eyes of the writer, a pleasant looking, clean shaven man of thirty-three years. He had on a new coat and shirt, but the rest of his clothing was old, although still distinguishable as the uniform of a French officer. Near by was his grinning negro Bon Temps, and Indian slaves moved quietly about the place, while from a room within came confused sounds and occasional laughter of officers engaged in a game of *vingt-et-un*. Every now and then the writer would pause and look out upon the boats in the river, or over the esplanade to his left at a large fort of palisades. As he mended his pen, his mind would go back to a childhood that could hardly remember father or mother, spent in Montreal or on the Canadian estate inherited by the older brother, to whom he was writing, and who had well played the part of father.

For this was Jean Baptiste LeMoyne de Bienville, writing the one private letter which has come down to us. He derived his title on the death of an older brother, who was called for Bienville, near Dieppe

in Normandy, whence their father came. From 1690 he had been in the king's service, and in that year his widowed mother died when he was only ten years old. He took part, one way or another, in expeditions against the Indians and forays towards New England, and a few years later he was garde marin, or midshipman, at Brest and Rochefort, the two great ports of France facing the Atlantic.

It was a curious retrospect for the Frenchman. A native of Montreal, he looked back over an already checkered career. He was writing to his oldest brother, thinking of the dead Iberville,—the greatest of the family,—in touch at Mobile with the sailor brother, Chateaugue, and writing betimes to Serigny, a brother in France. For he was the twelfth child, and, although several of them had died in battle, the family was still large, even if scattered. In 1698 he had come over with Iberville on that famous voyage to discover the Mississippi, lost since the time of LaSalle; he had commanded at Biloxi after the death of the first commandant; had aided Iberville in explorations after the second voyage, and then, in 1702, had by Iberville's orders removed the colony to Twenty-seven Mile Bluff on Mobile River.

II.—REMINISCENCES.

His mind went back with mingled feelings to that first Fort Louis, the beginning of French settlement of the Mississippi Valley, the foundation of State, Church, Family and of Industry in Louisiana. The jealousy of the Seminary priests and Jesuit Fathers came to his mind; the disastrous year of 1704, also, when, instead of the expected Iberville there had come his ship, the Pelican, bringing from San Domingo the pestilence which was so fatal. He re-

called the death of Tonty there, that greatest of French explorers, his interment under the sobbing pines, but with a smile he remembered also the consignment of marriageable girls on the Pelican; their distaste for corn-bread, and the resulting Petticoat Insurrection. The war of the Spanish succession was on and the next ship from France had brought the news that the invincible Louis XIV had met with the terrible defeat of Blenheim, where the star of Marlborough rose. Sailor as he was, Bienville remembered keenly the British capture of Gibraltar in that year and the defeat of the French navy under Louis' son, Toulouse. He had not been much at court and probably never heard of the death at that time of the Man of the Iron Mask, with his mystery, but tears came unbidden as the thought of yellow fever at Mobile reminded him of its victim, Iberville, at Havana two years later, on the eve of retrieving French fortunes at sea. His mind passed on to the accusations of the commissaire LaSalle, and of the priest, LaVente, which had poisoned the minds of the court, but had, on the other hand, attached the Canadians and soldiers the more firmly to him. As he writes on his pen records the names of some who had died.—Becancourt, Poitier, Duchery. Disaster at home had left him supreme in Louisiana; for French vessels were almost driven from the ocean and the government could hardly communicate with the colony. Sometimes he had to dispense his colonists among the Indians in the woods; but at least his colonists,—unlike Sir Walter Raleigh's,—came out of the woods again! These dispersals were a matter of policy, and the violin and dancing recorded by Penicaut were fruitful. If this led to the

mariages naturels with the squaws, so distasteful to the government, it also made for a more friendly understanding with the natives.

As his eye fell on the new Fort Louis over to his left, he was reminded of that other momentous year, 1711, when even the friendship of the natives had not been able to obviate the famine from the overflow, and he had removed the fort here to the river mouth. It was a new start for the colony, the beginning of Mobile as we now have it; and the change of base had been designed and carried out by him alone. For this time was the blackest in the history of Louis XIV's reign. Blenheim had been followed by Malplaquet and Ramillies and Oudenarde, and raiders had carried off a royal forester near Versailles. It seemed but a question of time when the allies would be at Paris itself. It is true that some slight successes followed and a change of ministers in England drove Marlborough from power; and thus the Peace of Utrecht, signed a few months before Bienville's letter, had given France peace with honor. And yet it humiliated him that Newfoundland, Acadia and Hudson's Bay, which he had helped to conquer, were ceded to the hated English.

One result was already clear. The king in 1712 had given over Louisiana to private enterprise, and Crozat and his associates were exploiting it for their own purposes. Cadillac had just succeeded Bienville and turned out the Canadians; he had even taken for his numerous family Chateaugue's attractive house just above the fort,—over there at the northwest corner of Conti and Royal,—the only handsome two-story dwelling in the town. Exploration had been pushed forward, but still it was commerce and not

agriculture from which returns were expected. Cadillac had been governor of Detroit before coming to Mobile—the two cities were of almost the same age—and brought with him the idea that Indian trade should be the foundation of colonial growth. Nevertheless the real centre of Indian diplomacy was rather in this house south of the fort than in Fort Louis. Bienville's influence was still needed, and he it was, who, the year after this letter, built Fort Toulouse (near our Wetumpka) to ally the Alibamons against the Carolina traders. It was he again who took the steps leading to building Fort Rosalie at Natchez, which kept open the river route to Canada. He thus secured the keys of the North-east and Northwest.

Taking up his pen again and discussing personal matters, Bienville says—happy man,—that he owed no debts, and seems then to have at least 7,000 livres in the Baron's hands in Canada, against which he gave orders,—inaugurating the banking business of the Gulf coast. He had earlier loaned Serigny 1,000 pieces, and his spendthrift nephew, St. Helene, cost him dear. All his property was earned by himself, for the paternal lands had been lost during his minority, and only Horn Island is reckoned to him in Louisiana.

In the letter Bienville confided a secret to his brother. He discussed the snarling Cadillac, but adds that this governor had a grown daughter of great attractions and that he had been for a year desirous of marrying her, if the Baron and his wife did not object, but he could do so only if the father was recalled. This he thought not unlikely, for he says he is himself in official favor again. "The

minister Pontchartrain," he says, "continually gives me the holy water of the court."

He naively admits that he had not yet mentioned marriage to the lady. The views of Mademoiselle Marie Madeleine de la Motte on this interesting subject have not been preserved. The story is somewhat like the Lady and the Tiger. At all events, Bienville never married, and we are left to conjecture whether he proposed or whether her answer was in the negative.

And at this climax we may turn from the letter, sent by voyageurs 2,000 miles to Montreal, and while he, the cure, commissaire and officers go to a lively dimer, we may cast a glance forward.

III.—THE MISSISSIPPI BUBBLE.

Louis XIV died soon after this time, and the regency of the Duke of Orleans followed. Cadillac was indeed recalled by the dissatisfied Crozat, and then even Crozat's rights were resigned. John Law obtained the ear of the prince, and, starting with his bank, soon absorbed all colonial functions in his Company of the West. This Mississippi Bubble promised much from the soil and mines of the great Valley, and Bienville was appointed governor to carry out the new plans.

The booming by Law benefited all Louisiana, but although the old fort, renamed Conde, was rebuilt of brick, the change lessened the relative importance of Mobile. Attention was henceforth directed to agriculture rather than commerce, and it so happened that a storm in 1717 blocked up with sand the harbor at the east end of Dauphine Island, which had heretofore played so important a part. Thus not only was interest centered in the more fertile lands

on the Mississippi, but a new port had to be sought. The result was first a port at New Biloxi and then the foundation of a town on the Mississippi, named for the Duke of Orleans. From this time we find Bienville devoting himself to granting and peopling land concessions on that river and its tributaries. Important as this was, we love rather to dwell on the earlier epoch, when the country was new and unexplored, when romance and adventure rather than returns attracted the French,—the time of Tonty, Iberville, Serigny, Chateaugue, Davison, St. Denis, and their like.

By 1722 John Law had failed. Two years later his executive in Louisiana promulgated the famous Black Code, regulating negroes and expelling Jews and heretics, but was himself recalled. The Canadian influence was again extinguished, and for several years Bienville remained in France. The regent was dead and Louis XV beginning the reign which promised so much. This was Bienville's first visit to France since he had left Brest with Iberville to re-discover the Mississippi, but it lasted several several years. Paris was attractive enough for a man of forty-four, but Bienville longed to return to America again. The government kept its eye on him and after the crown resumed Louisiana he was sent in 1733 to undo the mistakes of Perier with the Natchez Indians.

Two Choctaw wars resulted. In the first, when Bienville led an expedition from Mobile up the Tombigbee, he was defeated at Aekia in north Mississippi. In the second, the Illinois contingent, numbering among others his nephew, Longueuil, from Montreal, joined him and he succeeded in effecting

peace. Nevertheless in 1743 he desired to retire, and his wish was granted, to the distress of the colonists. He came to Dauphine Island to meet the Bellona, but the ship sank before his eyes, and it was from the Mississippi that he bade a last farewell to the colony which he had founded. He felt that he had not succeeded; but he was wrong. Compare his Louisiana with what he had found; compare his Louisiana with what followed. No one else had the same influence over the Indians or over the colonists; none other so combined the explorer, soldier and statesman. It is little short of wonderful that a sailor could be so changed into a landsman, a Canadian be so successful in a Southern climate. His brother Iberville had fallen a victim at forty-five; Bienville was to live to be eighty-eight.

IV.—IN THE PARIS OF LOUIS XV.

His passage of the ocean was not without danger from English ships, for France was involved in the War of the Austrian Succession. Old glories seemed to revive with Marshal Saxe and the Battle of Fontenoy, and the war ended with the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle. He lived to see her also pass through the Seven Years War, when Frederick the Great's battles in Europe obscured the greater events in America and India. Bienville had a personal interest, for he loaned a son of his sister, Catherine Jaenne, 10,000 livres to buy a commission in the cavalry; but he, himself nearing seventy, remained quietly in Paris.

Paris has always been interesting, and in the time of Louis XV it was the gayest capital in Europe. It may be there were undercurrents which would in time bring about great changes, but, if so,

no one knew it yet, and court and populace went about their usual occupations. Louis XIV had neglected Paris for Versailles, and the road between, passing by Sevres and St. Cloud, was the great resort on holidays. Nevertheless the Louvre, Tuileries and the Palais Royal were often used by the court and were the centre of Parisian interest. The Pont Neuf, leading over to the island where Notre Dame stood, was the place where one learned the news and saw the promenaders, and there Bienville often mingled with the crowds.

He had retired from public life when he was sixty, but he seems to have been provident of the future. He had gradually had his property invested in France, for he seems never to have returned to Canada after leaving it for the settlement of Louisiana. There was always opportunity for making money in Paris; but the stock-jobbers were now discredited, and the financiers, the successors of Bernard and the brothers Paris, whom Bienville knew, were in the ascendant. The wars in India had brought many Oriental luxuries to France. Bienville seems to have had a penchant for precious stones and invested in diamonds, which he wore upon his person.

Indeed, he could be said to live in considerable style. He had a valet de chambre called Veuraine, otherwise known as Picard, of whom he seemed quite fond. He did not have to walk through the muddy streets of Paris, with the water draining to the centre, as it then did, but had his coach and pair,—the coachman bearing the aristocratic name of Baron. A cook there was, of course,—her name Renaud,—who kept au fait with the new dishes continually invented at Versailles.

Bienville's house was on the east side of the Seine, near Montmartre, and, like other Parisian homes of that day, narrow and of two stories, overlooking a little garden in the rear, visible even from the street through the porte cochere. There he entertained his friends, and he was visited sometimes also by his relatives. His favorite kinsman, perhaps, was the second son of Serigny. The elder son had been captain in the navy, and then, like his father, employed at the Rochefort navy yard. But he died in 1753, and Bienville's affections centred on the younger, who became a captain in the army, distinguished for his bravery and his wounds. His occasional visits did the old governor's heart good. Of course this quarter century in France was not all spent at the capital. The country nobility lived in style, despite the drift to Paris. It may well be that Bienville went as a pilgrim to the home of his ancestors in Normandy, where his kinspeople were, and perhaps he visited occasionally the port of Rochefort, to be in touch again with colonial affairs. Nevertheless he did not seek public employ.

Of his mental basis we have little trace. He was contemporary with Voltaire, Rousseau and the Encyclopedists, besides having access to the literature of Louis XIV's reign, and he could hardly live in the Paris of that day and be untouched by these influences. His early literary style was not good, although always forcible, but in Paris it improved greatly. Whether he frequented any of the famous salons of the time we do not know, although his Cross of St. Louis would afford him entree anywhere. Possibly he was not at ease in the presence of those cultivated ladies and carpet knights; possibly the

face of Marie Madeleine—perhaps the remembrance of a Mobilienne beauty—kept the old governor out of such temptations. Perhaps the stately minuet was tame to one who knew the cotillon a la Mississippienne. To the church, however, he was always attached. Of the religious orders he favored the Jesuits, with whom he, as well as his father, had been brought up, but they were expelled from France in 1762. However, the cure of the parish was a frequent visitor at his house.

Bienville saw with mortification the partition of Louisiana at the Peace of Paris in 1763, by which Mobile and the eastern half was ceded to Great Britain, and he aided Milhet, the delegate from New Orleans, in resisting the gift of the west half of the colony to Spain; but we are told they saw only Choiseul, the prime minister. Bienville had not the influence or address to approach the true ruler of France, and probably no man of eighty could please La Pompadour.

V.—A FRENCH WILL.

One cold day in January, 1765, an old man sat in his little back parlor at Paris studying a large law book. He had had this leather back *Coutume de Paris* with him while he was in Louisiana. He knew it from title page of 1664 to index and final vignette, for Louis XIV had made it law for the colony. He was now studying the division headed “Titre XIV. des Testamens.” He was familiar enough with its contents, for, while colonial governor, he had often supervised the execution of wills and also the administration of estates; but it was a different thing to write his own will. He had written it before, how-

ever, and now in this olographic testament sets them all aside.

He slowly writes: "Persuaded as I am of the necessity of death and the uncertainty of its hour, I desire before it comes to put my affairs in order." His early training, sometimes perhaps forgotten during his varied life, returns to him as he commits his soul to God and declares that he wishes to live and die in the bosom of the church, imploring the pity of God and of the Saviour and asking the protection of the Holy Virgin, the Mother of God, of Saint John the Baptist, his patron saint, and of all the other saints in Paradise. Having made all his money himself, the Coutume allowed him to dispose of it as he saw fit. Therefore he bequeaths to the poor of his parish 1,000 livres, ordains that three hundred masses shall be said for the repose of his soul, and then passes to his friends. He gives to his valet a pension of 200 livres a year for life, besides outright 150 livres in the Hotel de Ville securities, and his wardrobe, including all clothing, and the lit garnit where he sleeps. To the cook he gives 300 livres, to the lackey 200 francs, to the coachman 100 livres, and to Marguerite, the cook's daughter, 50 francs.

His brothers and sisters are all dead, but he remembers their children handsomely. To his grandnephew, Payan de Noyan, he remits the loan of 10,000 livres, and to the boy's father, the oldest son of Bienville's sister, he gives a diamond worth 1500 livres. To the son of his brother, the Baron de Longueuil, he leaves a diamond, and two others to his two grand nieces, the granddaughters of his brother, Iberville.

He constitutes four residuary (universels) legatees,—a son each of his brothers Longueuil, Serigny and Chateaugue, with other descendants of Serigny as the fourth. His executor was to be a nephew, Le Moyne de Serigny, already made a legatee, whose duties were only to distribute the estate; for there were no debts.

After thinking over the document, Bienville added a codicil leaving to his nephew, Payan de Noyan, a diamond of equal value with the others.

He could have made a will in the presence of witnesses, or he could have had it drawn by a notary; but the old governor preferred to write his own in the form which the Coutume speaks of as “secret,” although as solemn and binding as any.

Anyhow it was done and he put it away carefully in his *eseritoire*, stirred up the fire and rang the bell for Picard. A decanter and a glass of Burgundy finished the transaction.

The will and codicil remained locked up in the desk, looked at once or twice without change, and on the 26th of April, 1767, Bienville went in his coach to the proper office to have it registered. This was not always done, but it was safer, even if it did cost 65 livres for the will and 13 sous for the codicil. There was only one part of the transaction which was unpleasant to him,—the name of the *Controleur* was Langlois,—and, if there was anything which Bienville hated, it was the word “English.”

VI.—MONTMARTRE.

With mind at ease, but with the increasing infirmities of age, Bienville lived in his little home for several years. Friends and relatives were willing

to stay with him, but the old man preferred to live alone with his servants.

✓ However, the hardiest constitution must yield at last, and the final summons came on March 7, 1768. The parish priest administered the last rites of the Catholic church. There was no wife, no sister, or child by his bed. It was left to the valet and the priest to soften his pillow and close his eyes.

The next day came the simple funeral, attended, however, by Captain Serigny, several kinsmen and people of note in colonial history. It wended its way through the narrow streets up the heights of Montmartre, and there, overlooking the Seine, as his home in Louisiana had overlooked the Mobile, was laid to rest one of the greatest of Frenchmen.

The simple head-stone was not to outlive the Prussians and the Commune, and his only epitaph is the church record of his death and burial. If one seeks his monument, it is the great country which he colonized.

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